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Title: Empirical Investigations of Opinion Frames and Survey Responses

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Dataset(s): 1988 National Election Study, 1989 Pilot Study

Abstract

Kinder and Nelson examine two complementary sets of question wording experiments contained in the 1989 Pilot Study. In the first experiment, Kinder and Nelson compare responses to questions that refer explicitly to the rival frames that dominate elite discourse -- "framed" items -- and responses to similar questions that do not use contextual frames -- "stripped" items. Kinder and Nelson find that frames facilitate the expression of opinion, through responses to framed items are generally no more extreme, stable, rooted in antecedents, or consequential for evaluations of the dominant political figures of the moment than stripped questions. Frames, however, do present certain advantages. Kinder and Nelson find that frames can affect the nature of public opinion in "locally sensible ways." Attitudes on assistance to blacks, for example, have greater political effects when relevant NES items are presented in framed versions. The second experiment undertaken by Kinder and Nelson compares responses to questions based on rival frames employed in elite discourse. Kinder and Nelson find small, but consistent, framing effects. Alternate frames occasionally shift the overall balance of opinion, highlight certain antecedents at the expense of others, and enhance or reduce the political relevance of opinions. In addition, the authors find that certain framing effects are consistent across issue areas. In particular, it seems that frames which allude to the moral shortcomings of social groups tap a natural way of thinking about public policy.